

Slang II

What constitutes slang is difficult to identify precisely. The word *slang* is not recognised by Johnson (1755) — except as the preterite of the verb *sling* (*sling-slang-slung*, on the same pattern as *ring-rang-rung*): “David slang a stone and smote the Philistine”. Nathaniel Bailey (1721) does not mention the word at all. The earliest quotation supplied by OED dates to 1756, and it does not offer an etymology for the word.

The OED rather loftily defines *slang* as “the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character; language of a low or vulgar type”. It gives a later meaning as “the special vocabulary or phraseology of a particular calling or profession”. That later definition has *slang* indistinguishable from jargon.

Eric Partridge, in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, gives a fair working idea of slang’s boundaries. He distinguishes as follows: slang and cant — colloquialisms — solecisms and catachreses — catchphrases — nicknames — vulgarisms. This nice subdivision is probably the best guide to the nature of slang.

Carl Sandburg captured the spirit of slang when he said “slang is a language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands and goes to work”. By contrast, G.K. Chesterton wrote “All slang is metaphor, and all metaphor is poetry”. Not many would equate slang with poetry, even obliquely.

However defined, slang is an informal register — one that makes its own rules, but steers clear of open vulgarity. Because it is home-made, jury-rigged language, it tends to be blunt, honest and unfinished.

Slang develops as capriciously as language in more formal registers, but the whole process is accelerated. Slang words emerge when circumstances are right; they change form or meaning quickly as their use spreads; and they flourish or they disappear — sometimes within a generation or two. Time and circumstances dictate what slang words are coined; chance and fashion dictate which words survive.

The following slang words all emerged at about the same time (1900–1920, but especially during the First World War). Some are so familiar as to have passed into more formal registers; others are completely forgotten, except among war veterans or their families:

welter (“to make a welter of it” — to go to extremes, take excessive trouble)

bonzer — extremely good

boshter, *bosker* — bonzer

dinkum (adjective) — genuine

dinkum (noun) — work, especially hard work

beetle about — to move about rapidly

blotto, *blithered*, *inked*, *oiled*, *molo*, *perked* — drunk

kip (noun) — sleep; also, a brothel

kip (verb) — to lodge or sleep; to play truant

kipsey — a house or home

offsider — assistant.

It is surprising to learn that *welter* and *offsider* were originally — and recently — slang words. Likewise, it is curious that the noun form of *dinkum* has virtually disappeared, and that the only meaning of *kip* which currently survives is sleep in a neutral sense.

Bouncer is no longer regarded as slang: the *Macquarie Dictionary* (3rd Edition, 1997) defines it without comment, as does the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998). But it was treated as slang as recently as 1989 (2nd Edition *Oxford English Dictionary*) and likewise was recorded as slang by Eric Partridge (1951) and by *Downing Digger Dialects* (1919). It has an entry in Francis Grose’s *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1811).

This recent respectability of *bouncer* is a strange thing, because its current meaning is both colloquial and recent.

From the early 19th Century, *bouncer* had two meanings: a large, swaggering or boastful person; a great lie or deception.

In those senses it is treated as slang until recent times. The original meaning of *bouncer* is noted in Johnson (1755) and in the 1902 edition of *Webster*.

Bouncer is now fairly specific: a person employed by a nightclub or similar

establishment to exclude patrons who may drink too little, and to expel those who have drunk too much. The original *bouncer* was a swaggering bully. Social Darwinism ensured that such people were physically strong (others had the tendency knocked out of them). The physical characteristics of swaggering bullies were thought useful at nightclubs, and the meaning shifted to suit the new reality. The current sense emerged in Australia and the US at about the time of the First World War. The English slang equivalent is *chucker out*.

Other bits of World War I slang which have survived and flourished include:

cobber — friend

furphy — false or exaggerated story

banger — sausage

buzz off — go away

nut it out — think a problem through to its conclusion

put the acid on (someone) — to ask someone for a loan: the ultimate test of genuine friendship. From the acid test by which the genuineness of gold is tested, as gold is unaffected by nitric acid.

Some World War I slang has disappeared, simply because modern circumstances no longer need such expressions:

Anzac button — nail used in place of a trouser button; nowadays we replace the trousers, that being cheaper than repairs

Anzac stew — an urn of hot water and one bacon rind; made famous by Lieutenant General Birdwood (‘Birdie’), the Anzac Commander at Gallipoli

Anzac wafer — a very hard biscuit

Anzac soup — water in a shell-hole polluted by a corpse.

Other slang expressions from the same time and circumstances have also disappeared, although they remain perfectly serviceable:

chivoo — a party or celebration (from the French *chez vous* — at your place)

catsow — the price of a beer — twopence (from the French *quatre sous*)

jildy — quickly (on the *jildy* — in a hurry) from Hindi

kangaroo feathers — a furphy; an impossible thing

kennel-up — stop talking

macnoon — mad or dippy (from the colloquial Egyptian Arabic magnoon — mad).

The exigencies of trench warfare made it likely that an expression would emerge to describe the ground between your own trenches and the enemy's: *no man's land*. It is an expression in common use today, with a weaker meaning for weaker circumstances.

No man's land has a much longer history than its current use suggests. From the 9th Century to about the 18th Century, *no man* (or *noman*) was a common synonym for *no-one* or *nobody*. In recorded use from the early 14th Century, *no man's land* simply meant land belonging to nobody. For centuries, *no man's land* was unoccupied and benign (at best) or wasteland, dark with foreboding (at worst). However, in a country that was relatively densely populated, unowned land was likely to have some fundamental defect. For that reason, perhaps, the expression *no man's land* acquired a negative connotation. The OED gives a

quotation (in Latin) from 1326 which has the unfortunate Arnold taken to *non-esmanneslond* outside London, where he was beheaded. But in 1881, Thomas Hughes (author of *Tom Brown's School Days*) writes of a "small plot of nomans land in the woods".

In WWI, *no man's land* was the stretch of disputed ground for which a terrible price was paid. Paradoxically, the price paid would render the real estate worthless, except to Generals. In this modern world of more remote, impersonal killing techniques, *no man's land* has reverted to its earlier sense.

Julian Burnside QC

Conference

16–22 September 2004: Florence, Italy, Pan Europe Asia Legal Conference. Contact: Rosana Farfaglia, Tel: (07) 3236 2601 Fax: (07) 3210 1555 or (07) 3251 0061, PO Box 843, New Farm, Qld 4005, E-mail: boccabella@qldbar.asn.au



John Larkins

furniture

individually crafted

Desks, tables (conference, dining, coffee, side and hall).

Folder stands for briefs and other items in timber for chambers and home.

Workshop:

2 Alfred Street,
North Fitzroy 3068

Phone/Fax: 9486 4341

Email: larkins@alphalink.com.au